

Interpretation

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A Grand Treatment of Political Life

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Paul Rahe's *Sparta's First Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 478–446 B.C.*, the second in a planned trilogy, concerns the struggle between Athens and Sparta in the wake of the Greek victory over the Persians. An immensely helpful prequel, *The Spartan Regime: Its Character, Origins, and Grand Strategy* (Yale University Press, 2016), concerning the peculiar domestic institutions of the Spartans and their implications for how Sparta conceived of itself in foreign policy, accompanies the trilogy. The first volume in the trilogy itself, *The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta: The Persian Challenge* (Yale University Press, 2015), treated the Greek's struggle with, and victory over, Persia.

Rahe's ambition in this trilogy is twofold. First, it is to provide a history. This second volume covers the ground Thucydides does in the early parts of his *Pentateuch*, the fifty years between the end of the Persian War (between the Greeks and the Persians) and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War (between Athens and Sparta). Rahe tells of Athens's rising and restless might, while charting the consistency of the steady, even plodding Spartan regime. Why these differences are crucial illuminates Rahe's second ambition: the rejuvenation of grand strategy as a basis for political reflection and action. Today's International Relations theorists see "state actors" on the world stage, calculating in terms of power and such. Their abstractions

distract from the raw reality of political life—its concern with winning and losing, friends and enemies—and from the ways the inside of a political community affects its approach to the outside. Grand strategists see the fundamental priority to domestic policy and recognize that a nation's distinctive regime affects and shapes how it sees its interests on the international stage. Grand strategists know their country's resources, peculiarities, customs, vulnerabilities, its passing whims and its permanent traits—and then ensure that its people have a will to win wars and have the will to deprive enemies of just such a will. The study of grand strategy thus aims at understanding the whole of political life.

Sparta's First Attic War begins with the situation after the Persians were defeated at Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale in 479 BC. Athens, fresh from victory with her newly acquired navy, headed the Delian League, an alliance aimed at keeping the Persians out of the Aegean Sea, in the aftermath of the war, while the Spartans declined to continue with mopping-up operations. Allies provided ships or, in lieu of them, payments, and Athens provided honest, public-spirited leadership, at least at first, in efforts against the Mede. This league slowly morphed into an empire, but only after Athens herself changed. (And as Rahe and Thucydides point out, some free-riding communities in the Delian League eventually ceased contributing either ships or money, moving the Athenians to compel payments by besieging them.) Sparta, the other great victor of these wars, retreated to the Peloponnese, disclaiming any desire to build an empire and preoccupied, it seems, with domestic troubles and corrupt leaders. Eventually, all the sides worked out a *modus vivendi* where each minded its sphere of influence, but Athens dreamed of expanding its own. The conflict would continue.

Rahe is great storyteller, instructing the reader on what it must have been like to see events as they unfolded. The Persians lost the key battles against Greece, but what were their future Greek ambitions? Would they recover and fight again? Each Persian king, after all, thought of himself as the “king of kings,” entitled to rule the known world. Should the Greeks act to “contain” the Persian king? Engage in rollback, to stop any future Persian invasion of Greece? Seek unconditional surrender? Or declare victory and go home?

Athenians had two visions for the postwar order. One grand strategist, Themistocles, architect of the Salamis victory, believed the Persian threat had receded, and Athens should focus elsewhere. It should undermine Sparta, its once ally but future enemy, he believed, by sowing seeds of discontent within Sparta's home-base alliances and roiling its huge slave population of

helots. This would afford Athens an empire, if she wanted it. The other grand strategist, Cimon, worried more about keeping Persia in its box and rolling back its holdings on the Aegean. Cimon built the Delian League and, with Aristeides, kept it just so the allies bought into its goals. While Themistocles would unsettle Athens's rear, Cimon depended on peace in Greece to proceed with his plans.

Athens pursued both plans at once. Themistocles engineered the rebuilding of Athens's walls and earnestly focused on fortifying the Peiraeus by 478 BC, against the strict wishes of the Spartans. Cimon cleaned up Persian stragglers, punished Medizers, and built the Delian League for the purpose of confronting a restored Persia—a purpose that was complete with his decisive victory on sea and land over the Persians at Eurymedon in 469, in what is today southern Turkey. The Peace of Callias between Cimon and the Persian king recognized realities but promised no permanent peace. Persia would stay where it was, while Athens, under Cimon's leadership (Themistocles had been ostracized by this time), would stay out of Cyprus and leave Persia proper undisturbed. Eurymedon confirmed what Salamis and Plataea established.

What would Athens do with its budding empire now that its front, in a sense, was secure? Here Cimon was a man out of season, friendly to Sparta and satisfied to keep the Delian League as a defensive alliance and not much of an empire. Domestic democratic reforms, including the building of the walls and the dependence on the navy, begun under Cimon and Aristeides, would make such a policy impossible to maintain. The rising *demos* required an empire, though its members may not have understood all its implications.

In fact, Rahe speculates deliciously here. He conjectures that the ostracized Themistocles spent his time weakening the Spartan alliance and pointing Athens to an alliance with Argos, Sparta's ancient enemy. Sparta, as became known later, was preparing to invade Attica at this point, in order to maintain its control of the Peloponnese. Instead, a cataclysm struck Sparta—a deadly earthquake followed by a helot revolt in 465/4 BC, which presented Athens with a question of grand strategy. Should Athens kick the Spartans while they were down (as the followers of Themistocles suggested) or follow Cimon's accommodationist policy?

Athens went with Cimon and marched to Sparta to lend her a hand in putting down the helot revolt, but events soon proved this cautious policy unsuited to the Athenian character and unwise in the circumstances. Sparta, suspicious of the Athenians, sent them away. Its plan to invade Attica became

known. Further democratic reforms within Athens undercut Cimon's position within the somewhat aristocratic, old-family Areopagus. These changes engendered "a diplomatic revolution," in Rahe's telling, and Cimon was ostracized in 461 (144). The Athenians would have to weigh the Delian League and the Persian threat against the menace of Sparta (if of a weakened Sparta).

The result of this situation was greater Athenian ambition but a two-front Athenian defeat—one confronting the Persians in Egypt (459) and one confronting the Spartans on land at Tanagra (458), north of Attica. These defeats amounted to an Athenian cataclysm akin to the earthquake and helot revolt. Athens would need a pause. So bad were things for the Athenians that Cimon was recalled to restore order in the east and a modicum of friendliness, mixed with the knowledge that future conflicts may come, with the Spartans. All the while Athens continued its transformation into an island on the land, with its long walls. This changed the city and encouraged a grand strategy that discounted the Spartan threat on land and pointed the Athenians to the sea. The Delian League, as a consequence, became the basis for empire instead of a defensive alliance. The book ends with a cease fire of a sort between Athens and Sparta, each side grudgingly leaving the field of battle but without hopes for a lasting peace with honor.

Much more besides this rich narrative is in the first volumes of Rahe's trilogy. The book succeeds marvelously as a tale of this time. No lover of the Greeks would want to miss this gripping tale, told by someone with keen political sensibilities and a vivid imagination for what is possible.

The book also succeeds marvelously as a reintroduction to the portrait of grand strategy so central to the ancient view of political science. Rahe's books may not, strictly speaking, be works of political philosophy. They synthesize Plutarch, Thucydides, Herodotus, Greek playwrights, new archeology, and much else into a story with big political questions at the center. Yet his work approaches political philosophy through his treatment of these different regimes and shows how the interplay between domestic and foreign policy reveals changes in regimes—where the different ideas of justice and a good life guide Athens, Sparta, and Persia and shape how each imagines its place in the political world. Rahe's approach to grand strategy provides an indispensable preparation for political philosophy. The books are fun reads and grist for deep political reflection.

GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

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